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EAST TIMOR POLICY

HOW IT IS BEING DUMPED

Gough Whitlam and President Suharto

Will the new Labor government repeat the tragic mistakes of the Whitlam government which were so strongly rejected by ALP policy and the wider community?

Since coming to office on 5 March, our Labor Government has moved steadily towards dumping Labor's policy on East Timor. Mr Hawke's statements in Jakarta have brought the Government's intentions and strategy clearly into focus.

By a combination of outright contravention of policy, inferences that it is out of date and stalling on the key issue of self-determination, the Government hopes to defuse Australian community and ALP support for implementation of the policy. For good measure, the Government has promoted the idea that Indonesia may respond with retaliatory measures if the policy is implemented.

POLICY HAS BEEN CONTRAVENED – IN FACT AND IN SPIRIT

Following media reports of Mr Hawke's visit to Jakarta, Mr Hayden claimed that the Prime Minister "didn't say anything that contradicted the policy . . .". Transcripts of official press briefings aside, one can only surmise that vocal nuance and off-the-record chats strengthened the unanimous journalistic interpretations of Mr Hawke's statements.

However, Mr Hayden's claim is clearly wrong in relation to military aid, and it disguises the fact that the Government has, so far, acted against the spirit of the central tenet of the policy: support for East Timorese self-determination.

While 'noting' there has not been an act of self-determination in East Timor, the Government has yet to affirm its support for that right. On at least two occasions in Jakarta, Mr Hawke even avoided using these words, referring instead to "an act of internationally supervised desire" and an "act of self-expression". Further, Mr Hawke said of the fact that there had been no such act: "Now that is in the past."

STALLING ON U.N. VOTE – IN JAKARTA'S INTEREST

Mr Hayden has argued that ALP resolutions say nothing on "when they must be implemented, the rate . . . (and) the extent to which they must be implemented." It is difficult to see this as anything other than cynical stalling in relation to the important United Nations vote.

Mr Hawke said in Jakarta that a decision on Australia's vote at the U.N. would be made closer to the time of the vote. That the Indonesian Government is already lobbying to have the issue removed from the agenda of the U.N. Decolonisation Committee is already known to our Government.

Mr Hawke's repeated statements in Jakarta that it is "not certain that a vote (at the U.N.) will actually take place" is ominous. Such comments lend weight to whispers that our Government has already secretly urged the new Portuguese Government not to pursue the issue at the U.N.

The failure of the Government to actively promote and support the issue at the U.N. immediately, is against the central tenet of ALP policy. By keeping out of the self-determination issue at present, the Government is aiding Jakarta's strategy at the United Nations.

POLICY IGNORED

ALP POLICY: The ALP opposes all defence aid to Indonesia until there is a complete withdrawal of Indonesian occupation forces from East Timor

MR HAWKE: "As Mr Hayden has indicated, that (military aid) is continuing and will continue." (June 4 in Jakarta)

MR HAYDEN: "The man didn't say anything that contradicted the policy of the party." (Age, June 8)

On May 6 in Darwin, an Attack-class patrol boat was handed over to the Indonesian navy.

CHANGED CIRCUMSTANCES?

With a clear inference that ALP policy is out of date, Mr Hawke in Jakarta referred frequently to the necessity of making decisions on the basis of present circumstances rather than those current at the time policy was adopted. When asked what has changed on Timor, Mr Hawke identified three "achievements": the acceleration of family reunions; negotiations on opening an AAP office in Jakarta; the projected visit to Indonesia and East Timor by a parliamentary delegation.

None of these can be claimed to be significant. A new arrangement for completing a truncated family reunion program agreed to six years ago was in place before the Labor Government came to office. Re-admission, on a limited basis, of Australian media to Indonesia was mooted by key Indonesian officials at a conference in Bali in December 1982. Jakarta was clearly preparing to accept a very limited parliamentary delegation visit to Timor before Bill Hayden visited Jakarta in April. These "achievements" fall far short of the key issue: East Timorese self-determination.

PARLIAMENTARY DELEGATION – A DEVICE TO DUMP POLICY?

Mr Hawke has conferred great importance on the parliamentary visit to East Timor. He says it will contribute to informed debate and help in determining Australia's vote at the U.N. He has hypothesised that the visit might reveal that "the best interests of the people of East Timor . . . (were) served by a continuation of their being part of Indonesia". He says the delegation will "make an assessment about the degree of authority which has been established within East Timor and the economic developments, social opportunities that have been created . . . since 75-76".

If that is the aim of the delegation's visit, it will be a waste of time and money. No one doubts the "degree of authority" that has been established, but the delegation won't see the massive military operations employed to establish the authority. Nor will the delegation see how the authority is maintained.

All independent reports from East Timor in the last 18 months have conceded that Jakarta has spent considerable sums in Timor in recent times. Mr Hawke already believes the Timorese have benefited from the Indonesian presence. He told President Suharto in a formal speech that "Australia acknowledges and wishes to encourage the major efforts the Indonesian Government has been making to improve the . . . conditions of life for the people of East Timor after centuries of colonial misrule . . .".

The Australian delegation should have the time, conditions and right to determine real, rather than assumed, benefits from Indonesian economic programs being imposed on East Timor. The delegation should be able to determine the experiences, attitudes and desires of the East Timorese themselves. This is impossible in a two or three day tour. No visit, no matter how comprehensive, can substitute for an act of self-determination.

Given its importance in Indonesian eyes, it is certain to be a showcase tour. As presently constituted, it cannot be accorded the importance attached to it by Mr Hawke.

PHONEY THREATS – AUSTRALIAN MADE?

Where logic fails, threats might help. This tactic has long been used by conservative forces in Australia. It is a cause for considerable dismay to see the ALP Government promoting fears that Australian defence of the right of the East Timorese to self-determination might lead to retaliatory measures from Jakarta. These allegedly include denial of landing and overflight rights to Qantas in Indonesia.

Indonesia would have a lot to lose by pursuing such a policy – but has this threat really come from Indonesia? Probably not. It has floated around Canberra for years and is most likely an Australian creation. A Canberra Times editorial concluded: "It is much more likely that an overly cautious, not to say pusillanimous, Department of Foreign Affairs has sooled those bogeys on to the new Government . . ."

WHAT THE GOVERNMENT SHOULD DO

It is likely that Jakarta has actually granted some "concessions", precisely because our Government has a strong policy on Timor. The 'quiet diplomacy' employed by the Fraser Government (and Washington) was a monumental failure. Active support by the Australian Government for East Timorese self-determination could win gains for the Timorese.

The first and logical place to do this is at the United Nations. Australia should urgently lobby in support of the issue at the U.N. This is the least it can do.

Mr Hayden has argued that in diplomacy, "words can be bullets". So it is that strong Australian words may slow the bullets in East Timor. The peace of the graveyard is not an acceptable peace for the East Timorese. Re-colonisation of Timor by Indonesia with guns or money is unacceptable while Timorese reject it.

There are now too many signs that the central aspect of ALP policy – support for the East Timorese right to self-determination – is being dumped. Only forthright calls, from within the ALP and without, can ensure this does not occur.

WHY THE UNITED NATIONS IS IMPORTANT

The issue of East Timorese self-determination must remain on the United Nations agenda:

This ensures the possibility of international diplomatic activity towards a genuine act of self-determination for the East Timorese;

It is vital instrument of international scrutiny of the Indonesian occupation of East Timor. Such scrutiny does dampen human rights violations.

Immediate active Australian government support for self-determination at the U.N. will ensure its survival on the U.N. agenda. Failure to act in this way now, will effectively aid Indonesian strategy against the Timorese.

Prepared by: Australia-East Timor Association, P.O.Box 93 Fitzroy Vic 3065